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SUBJECT: A HORRIBLE HALLOWEEN AT THE TURKMENABAT AMERICAN CORNER

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) Post received its second protest dipnote on November 13, part of a series of complaints from the host government about a children's Halloween party that the American Corner attempted to host in the city of Turkmenabat on October 30. While successful Halloween events took place at other American Corners, in Turkmenabat the Corner continues to bear the brunt of the welayat's feudalistic power structure -- where individuals in the local government appear to take extra efforts to intimidate post counterparts and contacts. The host government's overblown reaction and threats in response to American Corners activities typify the confusing, often ridiculous, and heavily time-consuming process of interacting with the host government. That children, teachers and parents continue to frequent the corners demonstrates with equal force how desperate Turkmenistanis are to engage in non-governmental educational and community activities.

KIDS HAVING FUN A THREAT TO THE HOST GOVERNMENT

¶12. (U) On the night of October 30, about 100 middle and high-school aged students and school graduates assembled at a caf in Turkmenabat city for a Halloween party organized by the Turkmenabat American Corner. The children had bought tickets to the event, and were arriving in costume when local sanitation officials appeared and shut the caf down for "health reasons." The American Corner staff attempted to relocate to another caf but two men, presumably government agents, warned the owner not to allow the event on his premises. At the same time, attendees reported seeing two cars parked near the caf, and in one a man was videotaping the crowd. (Comment: About 150 youth had bought tickets to the event but Corner staff later learned that several had been warned by school officials not to attend. End Comment.)

¶13. (U) On October 31, American Corner Director Nina Afanasyeva was called in to local education department headquarters, where she was interrogated and threatened with prison by Lebab Welayat Hakimlik representatives Agamurad Jomartov, Chief of the Department for Relations with International Organizations, and Batyr Abdiyev, Senior Specialist of the same Department; also present were two to three representatives from the Education Department (Oblono) and local tax service. The tax service officials insisted that the American Corner was illegally making revenue off ticket sales and -- to compound this crime -- would not have the mechanism to pay taxes on this revenue because the Corner was not a registered organization. Afanyaseva explained that tickets were sold to defray the cost of the event and to support a charitable donation to a local elderly home. The local officials emphasized that Afanasyeva was flirting with the prospect of prison for her crimes. The browbeating was similar in style to that administered to Afanasyeva in mid-December 2005 after a visit by CAO and the Embassy Grants

Coordinator to give an open presentation on grants to Corner visitors (Comment: At that presentation, a representative of the Department for Relations with International Organizations and the welayat official in charge of curriculum development, Kerimberdy Masharipov, had behaved in a threatening manner to CAO, Afanasyeva and Corner visitors, first demanding participant names and, when CAO refused, making a show of taking down the names of the participants. End Comment.)

HOST GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES COORDINATED PROTESTS

¶4. Post received the following protest dipnote on October 31 (#09/273n): "ACCELS Coordinator in Lebap Welayat Nina Afanasyeva distributed tickets to a celebration of an American holiday "Halloween" among students of secondary schools of Turkmenabat city at a price of 20,000 manats without prior agreement of the Turkmen side.

First, this event was planned to be held on October 30, 2006, at 19:00 at the Selbi Caf. Since this disco club was closed by sanitary-epidemiological services, the event venue was moved to the Cardelia Caf, but the event wasn't held there either. 150 teenagers along with Peace Corps volunteers were supposed to participate. Supposedly, Afanasyeva was intending to hold the activity in the Asia Caf on October 31, 2006.

In connection with the information above, the Turkmen side demands that the US side not conduct such actions from now on."

¶5. (U) Soon after receipt of the protest dipnote, Emboffs began receiving oral protests from the host government, including a call from Ministry of Foreign Affairs Americas Desk chief Serdar Bashimov to the CAO and a reprimand from Minister of Education Shemshat Annaglyjova to Emboffs and the Charge d'Affaires during an October

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31 meeting on educational issues. These protests consisted of three complaints: that the American Corner was not authorized to collect revenue, that the activities of current students fell under the purview of the Ministry of Education and that therefore the American Corner was violating the rights of the Ministry of Education, and that Halloween was an alien concept of no educational value. At the same time, the protests included the statement that post and the Corners were allowed to hold events, as long as the embassy informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in advance via a diplomatic note. Post acknowledged that this requirement was made of all public events and reminded Corner staff of the need to inform the embassy of such large events to prevent such protests and harassment in future.

HOST GOVERNMENT SHUTS DOWN AMERICAN CORNER EVENT, THREATENS PARENTS AND CHILDREN

¶6. In defiance of the local government threats, the American Corner staff attempted to hold a much smaller version of the event on Corner premises, for about twenty local youth, on November 1, prompting government agents to come in and break up the event again, protesting that it was illegal and that Afanasyeva had disobeyed host government orders. This second attempt to hold a fun event for local youth prompted a protest call on the morning of November 2 from post's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Americas Desk Officer to the PAO reiterating the host government's earlier complaints. In the meantime, American Councils relayed several reports from Turkmenabat that the directors of nearly every school in Turkmenabat had called parents in and questioned them about their "child's behavior" and activities, and in some cases told either parents or their children that involvement in American Corner activities could cost the parents their jobs. (Comment: In at least two cases, parents reported having to sign letters to the local educational department promising no further contact. End Comment.) Turkmenabat Corner staff reported that several students rushed into the Corner during the day to report these threats and return borrowed items.

¶7. (U) On November 7, post issued its own protest dipnote (No.

1118/06) in which it asked the host government to cease from harassing patrons and staff of the Turkmenabat American Corner (excerpt):

"Such harassment violates the spirit of cultural exchanges which the Embassy wishes to cultivate with the people of Turkmenistan. The Embassy has received numerous reports of threats and warnings to local schoolchildren not to attend events at or otherwise visit the American Corner.

The Embassy will make every effort to inform Government of Turkmenistan officials of its sponsored events. In the event that local officials question such events, Embassy requests that the Embassy be immediately contacted by the Ministry, local harassment of local participants in these events is unacceptable." Following a week of consideration, the Embassy received a second protest dipnote from the host government (No 09/273n of October 13, 2006) which failed to respond to these charges and instead echoed the host government's earlier complaints."

COMMENT

¶8. (U) Post and the American Corners are daily engaged in efforts to transparently engage members of the public -- but incidents like that in Turkmenabat demonstrate that post's domain and rights is a daily evolving concept. When organizing events, post takes into account that current students and teachers in Turkmenistan's schools are de facto the property of the Ministry of Education in all extracurricular activities, even on weekends and during vacations. Students and parents are aware of the risks to engaging with foreign agencies, but the lack of alternative social and educational outlets for youth has made the American Corners' programming very popular, even among some brave employees of state agencies

¶9. (U) Threats to university level students and teachers have proved effective in preventing these groups from frequenting the Corners. Post notes that a coordinated local government effort to threaten teachers away from the Turkmenabat Corner in 2004 has succeeded in keeping most teachers away. This most recent incident of coordinated threats against Corner patrons is the most extensive effort against any American Corner of which post is aware. Additionally, this is the first known instance of Turkmenistan authorities closing down an event being held physically inside an American Corner. Youth who have graduated are no longer subject to the desires of the Ministry of Education and, with no opportunity for higher education available immediately upon graduation, comprise a steady percentage of American Corner visitors. End Comment.

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